

The Problem with Paul – Sermon #3: Paul and Slavery

Eph. 6:5-8

Oct. 5, 2003

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Media mogul Ted Turner once said that, “Christianity is for losers.” Makes you really want to root against the Braves, doesn’t it? What Turner doesn’t know is that he’s right! In Paul’s time, the gospel message appealed most to people who were on the bottom of society, the people without power or status, the “losers” of his time. This most certainly included the household slaves.

But the word “slave” has picked up a lot of baggage between Paul’s time and ours, and when we now read words like our passage today, we react in a variety of way – anger, bewilderment, disgust – based on our culturally loaded definition of the word “slave.” So if we are going to call ourselves Christian, what do we do with Paul’s words?

This is the last sermon in this series looking at the problem of Paul. In our first two sermons, we looked at Paul’s troubling words about women and about the relationships between wives and husbands. In both cases, we used a metaphor of a bridge to help our understanding. We said that on one side was Paul’s ancient culture and on the other side was our very different modern culture, and in between was this shaky bridge across which all our interpretations and understandings must travel. We’ll be crossing this bridge this morning as we attempt to make some sense out of Paul’s words.

Except for a few disturbed extremists, all of us agree that the concept of slavery is repugnant and repulsive. The history of our country is scarred with the evidence of slavery and the continuing effects it has on race relations. Slavery is now abolished and segregation and discrimination are illegal, but there’s no question that the wounds caused by slavery are still open and festering.

So when we come across these passages in Paul’s letters, we don’t know what to make of them. And that’s a problem we can’t run away from, because the concept of slavery is quite prevalent in the Bible. In fact, in the New Testament alone, there are more than 190 words referring to slaves and slavery. We tend to miss this fact because we’ve softened the translation from “slave” to “servant.” But that doesn’t erase slavery’s presence in the Bible.

What’s even more disturbing than Paul’s words about slavery is how his words have been used. For me it’s both painful and infuriating to realize that thousands of sermons were preached by white Southern ministers on these texts, using them to continue the oppression of slaves and to send Southern soldiers to their death believing God was on their side in defending slavery. Paul’s letters have been bloodied by the Civil War, and that’s a fact that cannot be softened by changing “slave” to “servant.”

Paul’s words on this issue have caused more death, damage, and destruction than almost any other words in the Bible. And our gut reaction is to hold Paul accountable for how his letters were used. But blaming Paul for the treatment of American slaves is like blaming Shakespeare for the poor lighting in a modern production of “MacBeth.” Paul was writing about slavery in a much, much different context than we understand slavery. On our side of the bridge, we want to know why Paul, someone so fervently supportive of the gospel, didn’t call for an end to a system as oppressive an evil as slavery. To get an answer, we have to go back across the bridge to Paul’s time.

When we get there, the first thing we'll need to do is redefine our understanding of slavery. From our modern viewpoint, slavery is a dehumanizing, oppressive system that treats people like cattle and destroys their self-worth and freedom. If Paul had witnessed American slavery there's no doubt in my mind he would have spoken out strongly against it. One of the most common interpretive mistakes that's made from our side of the bridge is to assume that the Roman slavery Paul experienced was identical to the American version of slavery, when in fact they were fundamentally different in several key ways.

Slavery in antiquity was a building block of the Roman society, and slaves were a crucial part of each household. Slaves could be well-educated and were tutors of their master's children. They could join the same clubs as free people. They had many legal rights, including the right to appeal to a higher authority in the case of unfair treatment. And most importantly, unlike the life sentence of American slavery, Roman slaves were often given their freedom after a 10 to 20-year period of work.

In fact, Roman slavery was so accepted that many people chose to sell themselves into slavery to find a better life than they had as free people. So when Paul says, "Slaves, obey your masters," he's not condemning them to a life of slavery as we understand it; he's encouraging them to fulfill their obligation under the very different Roman system of slavery.

Now let me be very clear here so that there's no misunderstanding. My explanation of this issue does not equal my support of it. I'm not condoning any form of slavery, regardless of how well the slaves were treated. A well-educated slave is still a slave, and that's never an acceptable situation in my understanding of the gospel. But in order for us to understand Paul's motives, we need to understand the reality in which he lived, and how he used the gospel to transform that reality.

For example, although we may shudder at the use of the word "slave," in Paul's time one-third of the Roman population was slaves and one-third was former slaves. So there would have been a high level of significance for his readers when Paul uses a term like "slave of Christ" to describe his own relationship with Jesus.

The Greek word "kyrios," which we often translate as "Lord," would have been heard by Paul's readers as the common word for "master," as in this passage from 2 Corinthians: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as master, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." Paul's dominant metaphor for his relationship to Christ was that of slave and master. He saw himself as a slave of Christ, pledged in servitude to Christ in order to do his work and spread the gospel.

This understanding of Paul is critical for us as we bring his words back across the bridge. Because of the foundational role the institution of slavery played in Roman society, it probably didn't even cross Paul's mind to protest against slavery. To do so would have been interpreted as treason and would have ended his missionary work, and probably his life. There was no such thing as the right to free speech or civil rights in Paul's time, and trying to force those on him or hold him accountable for them is like cutting the bridge down between us.

Instead of trying to change the institution, what Paul does is try to change the individuals within it, transforming their understanding. We saw this last week with marriage, when Paul encouraged sacrificial love from both men and women, even though

men were the dominant heads of the household. We see the same thing here with slaves and masters.

First of all, Paul addresses the slaves directly, treating them as people of self-worth and deserving of respect. Paul tells slaves that if they are going to live with the reality of slavery, they should fulfill their obligation of service. "Obey your masters." But Paul takes it a step further by saying don't do this simply because you are required to; do it as an act of devotion, mirroring your devotion to Christ. He tells them to serve wholeheartedly, as if they were serving the Lord, because they will be rewarded for their good service, a reward far beyond anything they will receive here on earth.

Even though our situation couldn't be more removed from that of first-century slaves, there's a message here for us. William Barclay puts it this way: "Paul tells slaves to be Christian where they are. We can be Christian wherever we are and whatever we do. Christianity does not offer us an escape from circumstances; it offers us a conquest of circumstances." In other words, Christianity doesn't show us a way around life's challenges; it shows us a way through them.

That's what Paul is saying to slaves, and to us. Make the most out of your situation by approaching it from a Christian perspective and using Christian values, and we will be rewarded for our faithfulness. There are going to be times when we're in a situation we simply don't want to be in, but don't have any choice – a meeting, a relationship, a job. What Paul tells us is to let our Christian values and beliefs guide us through those situations, so that at the end we'll know we stay true to our faith and can still hold our heads high.

There's one more verse that we didn't read this morning. It's the next one, verse 9. After Paul instructs the slaves on how they are to behave, he says this: "And masters, treat your slaves the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."

"Masters, treat your slaves the same way." Do you think that was preached in the south 150 years ago? But that's Paul's ultimate point: through Christ's eyes we are all the same. There is no Greek or Jew, no slave or free, no woman or man. We are all equal, one in Jesus Christ. That's the solution to the problem of Paul.